

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION**

CHRISTOPHER BLANN,

Petitioner,

v.

SHERMAN CAMPBELL,

Respondent,

Case No. 2:19-cv-11164

Honorable Nancy G. Edmunds
United States District Court Judge

**OPINION AND ORDER: (1) SUMMARILY DENYING THE PETITION FOR WRIT OF
HABEAS CORPUS, (2) DECLINING TO ISSUE A CERTIFICATE OF
APPEALABILITY, AND (3) DENYING LEAVE TO APPEAL *IN FORMA PAUPERIS***

Christopher Blann, ("Petitioner"), incarcerated at the Gus Harrison Correctional Facility in Adrian, Michigan, seeks the issuance of a writ of habeas corpus pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2254. In his *pro se* application, petitioner challenges his sentence for assaulting a prison employee. For the reasons that follow, the petition for writ of habeas corpus is SUMMARILY DENIED WITH PREJUDICE.

I. BACKGROUND

Petitioner pleaded guilty to assaulting a prison employee and was sentenced to three to ten years in prison.

Petitioner's conviction and sentence were affirmed on appeal. *People v. Blann*, No. 342435 (Mich.Ct.App. Mar. 26, 2018); *leave den.* 503 Mich. 887 (Mich. 2018).

Petitioner seeks a writ of habeas corpus on the following ground:

The trial court failed to impose a sentence that is proportionate to the defendant's circumstances and the circumstances of the offense, he is therefore entitled to resentencing.

II. Standard of Review

28 U.S.C. § 2254(d), as amended by The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA), imposes the following standard of review for habeas cases:

An application for a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of a person in custody pursuant to the judgment of a State court shall not be granted with respect to any claim that was adjudicated on the merits in State court proceedings unless the adjudication of the claim—

- (1) resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States; or
- (2) resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding.

A decision of a state court is “contrary to” clearly established federal law if the state court arrives at a conclusion opposite to that reached by the Supreme Court on a question of law or if the state court decides a case differently than the Supreme Court has on a set of materially indistinguishable facts. *Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 405-06 (2000). An “unreasonable application” occurs when “a state court decision unreasonably applies the law of [the Supreme Court] to the facts of a prisoner’s case.” *Id.* at 409. A federal habeas court may not “issue the writ simply because that court concludes in its independent judgment that the relevant state-court decision applied clearly established federal law erroneously or incorrectly.” *Id.* at 410-11. “[A] state court’s determination that a claim lacks merit precludes federal habeas relief so long as ‘fairminded jurists could disagree’ on the correctness of the state court’s decision.” *Harrington v. Richter*, 562 U.S. 86, 101 (2011)(citing *Yarborough v. Alvarado*, 541 U.S. 652, 664 (2004)).

The Michigan Court of Appeals denied petitioner’s application for leave to appeal on petitioner’s direct appeal in a form order “for lack of merit in the grounds presented.”

The Michigan Supreme Court subsequently denied the petitioner leave to appeal in a standard form order without any extended discussion. Determining whether a state court's decision resulted from an unreasonable legal or factual conclusion, as would warrant federal habeas relief, does not require that there be an opinion from the state court that explains the state court's reasoning. *Harrington*, 562 U.S. at 98. "Where a state court's decision is unaccompanied by an explanation, the habeas petitioner's burden still must be met by showing there was no reasonable basis for the state court to deny relief." *Id.* In fact, when a habeas petitioner has presented a federal claim to a state court and that state court has denied relief, "it may be presumed that the state court adjudicated the claim on the merits in the absence of any indication or state-law procedural principles to the contrary." *Id.* at 99. That presumption may be overcome only when there is a reason to think that some other explanation for the state court's decision is more likely. *Id.* at 99-100.

In the present case, the AEDPA deferential standard of review applies where the Michigan Court of Appeals rejected petitioner's appeal "for lack of merit in the grounds presented" and the Michigan Supreme Court subsequently denied leave to appeal in a standard form order, because these orders amounted to a decision on the merits. See *Werth v. Bell*, 692 F. 3d 486, 492-94 (6th Cir. 2012).

In addition, a petition for a writ of habeas corpus must allege facts that establish a cause of action under federal law or it may summarily be dismissed. See *Perez v. Hemingway*, 157 F. Supp. 2d 790, 796 (E.D. Mich. 2001). Federal courts shall also dismiss any habeas petition that is legally insufficient on its face. See *McFarland v. Scott*, 512 U.S. 849, 856 (1994). A federal district court is authorized to summarily dismiss a

habeas corpus petition if it plainly appears from the face of the petition or the exhibits that are attached to it that the petitioner is not entitled to federal habeas relief. See *Crump v. Lafler*, 657 F.3d 393, 396, n. 2 (6th Cir. 2011); *Carson v. Burke*, 178 F.3d 434, 436 (6th Cir. 1999); Rules Governing § 2254 Cases, Rule 4, 28 U.S.C. foll. § 2254. The Sixth Circuit, indicated a long time ago that they “disapprove the practice of issuing a show cause order [to the respondent] until after the District Court first has made a careful examination of the petition.” *Allen v. Perini*, 424 F.3d 134, 140 (6th Cir. 1970). A district court therefore shall screen out any habeas corpus petition which is meritless on its face. *Id.* at 141. No return to a habeas petition is necessary when the petition is frivolous, or obviously lacks merit, or where the necessary facts can be determined from the petition itself without consideration of a return by the state. *Id.*

After undertaking the review required by Rule 4, this Court concludes, for reasons stated in greater detail below, that petitioner’s sentencing claim does not entitle him to habeas relief, such that the petition must be summarily denied. See *McIntosh v. Booker*, 300 F. Supp. 2d 498, 499 (E.D. Mich. 2004).

III. Discussion

Petitioner claims that his sentence is disproportionate to the offense and to the offender.

A habeas petitioner who attacks the severity of a prison sentence on Eight Amendment grounds faces a formidable challenge. He or she may obtain relief only if the state court decision contravened or misapplied “clearly established” Supreme Court precedent. However, the Supreme Court has acknowledged “that our precedents in this

area [the Eighth Amendment] have not been a model of clarity." *Lockyer v. Andrade*, 538 U.S. 63, 72 (2003). "Indeed, in determining whether a particular sentence for a term of years can violate the Eighth Amendment, we have not established a clear or consistent path for courts to follow." *Id.* Thus, the Supreme Court declared that the general applicability of the proportionality standard to term-of-years sentences was clearly established, but confessed to a lack of clarity as to the factors lower courts should consider in making that determination. *Id.* The Supreme Court concluded that "the only relevant clearly established law amenable to the 'contrary to' or 'unreasonable application of framework is the gross disproportionality principle, the precise contours of which are unclear, applicable only in the 'exceedingly rare' and 'extreme' case." *Id.*

In *Lockyer*, the Supreme Court reversed the Ninth Circuit's grant of a writ of habeas corpus on the ground that two twenty-five-year-to-life sentences imposed under California's "three strikes" law, where the triggering felony was the theft of \$ 150 worth of video tapes, violated the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause of the Eighth Amendment. The Supreme Court noted that the "thicket" created by its jurisprudence consisted primarily of its decisions in *Solem v. Helm*, 463 US. 277 (1983), *Harmelin v. Michigan*, 501 U.S. 957 (1991), and *Rummel v. Estelle*, 445 U.S. 263 (1980). The California state court in Andrade's case indicated that the proportionality rule enunciated in *Solem* was cast into doubt by *Harmelin*, and proceeded to analyze Andrade's sentence under the approach taken in *Rummel*, where the Supreme Court rejected a claim that a life sentence imposed under Texas' recidivist statute was grossly disproportionate to the theft felonies that formed the predicate for the sentence. The California court concluded that Andrade's sentence was not disproportionate. The Supreme Court held that this

decision was not contrary to or an objectively unreasonable application of federal law that was clearly established by the Supreme Court. *Lockyer*, 538 U.S. at 72-77.

A plurality of the Supreme Court held that the Eighth Amendment does not require strict proportionality between the crime and sentence. *Harmelin*, 501 U.S. at 965. As the Supreme Court noted in *Lockyer*, after *Harmelin* there is a general consensus that the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause of the Eighth Amendment forbids only an extreme disparity between crime and sentence, that is, sentences that are “grossly disproportionate” to the crime. *Id.* at 1001 (Kennedy, J., concurring); *Coleman v. Mitchell*, 268 F. 3d 417, 453 (6th Cir. 2001)(citing *Coker v. Georgia*, 433 U.S. 584, 592 (1977)); *United States v. Hopper*, 941 F. 2d 419, 422 (6th Cir. 1991)).

“Outside the context of capital punishment, successful challenges to the proportionality of particular sentences have been exceedingly rare.” *Rummel*, 445 U.S. at 272. Rummel was convicted of obtaining \$ 120.75 by false pretenses, a crime punishable by at least two years, but not more than ten years in prison. He was sentenced as a recidivist to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole. His two prior felonies consisted of fraudulent use of a credit card to obtain \$ 80 worth of goods and services, a felony punishable by two to ten years in prison; and passing a forged check for \$ 28.36, a crime punishable by two to five years in prison. The Supreme Court held that Rummel’s life sentence under the state recidivist statute did not constitute cruel and unusual punishment. In *Harmelin*, the Supreme Court upheld a life sentence without the possibility of parole for possession of more than 650 grams of cocaine for an offender with no prior felony convictions.

The Supreme Court overturned a life sentence in *Solem*, finding it to be significantly disproportionate to Helm's crime and therefore prohibited by the Eighth Amendment. However, Helm had been sentenced to life imprisonment *without* the possibility of parole for uttering a "no account" check for \$ 100, and his prior felonies also were minor, nonviolent crimes. By contrast, the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Rummel* and found constitutionally sufficient a sentence of twenty-five years to life imposed upon a fifth felony conviction. *Ewing v. California*, 538 U.S. 11, 24-31 (2003).

In the present case, petitioner's sentence for assaulting a prison employee fell within the maximum sentence set by state law, and "a sentence within the statutory maximum set by statute generally does not constitute 'cruel and unusual punishment.'" *United States v. Organek*, 65 F. 3d 60, 62 (6th Cir. 1995)(citation omitted)(quoted with approval in *Austin v. Jackson*, 213 F. 3d 298, 302 (6th Cir. 2000). "As long as the sentence remains within the statutory limits, trial courts have historically been given wide discretion in determining 'the type and extent of punishment for convicted defendants.'" *Austin*, 213 F. 3d at 301 (quoting *Williams v. New York*, 337 U.S. 241, 245 (1949)).

In light of "the vagueness of the gross-disproportionality principle and the admonition that the principle is "applicable only in the 'exceedingly rare' and 'extreme' case," this Court concludes that the state courts did not unreasonably apply clearly established law in rejecting petitioner's proportionality claim. See *Smith v. Howerton*, 509 F. App'x. 476, 484 (6th Cir. 2012)(internal quotations omitted).

IV. A certificate of appealability.

Before Petitioner may appeal this decision, a certificate of appealability must issue. See 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(1)(a); Fed. R.App. P. 22(b). A certificate of appealability may

issue "only if the applicant has made a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2). When a court denies a habeas claim on the merits, the substantial showing threshold is met if the petitioner demonstrates that reasonable jurists would find the court's assessment of the claim debatable or wrong. See *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473, 484–85 (2000).

For the reasons stated in this opinion, the Court will deny petitioner a certificate of appealability because he has failed to make a substantial showing of the denial of a federal constitutional right. See *Allen v. Stovall*, 156 F. Supp. 2d 791, 798 (E.D. Mich. 2001). The Court will also deny petitioner leave to appeal *in forma pauperis*, because the appeal would be frivolous. *Id.*

V. ORDER

Based upon the foregoing, IT IS ORDERED that the petition for a writ of habeas corpus is **SUMMARILY DENIED WITH PREJUDICE**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED That a certificate of appealability is **DENIED**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Petitioner will be **DENIED** leave to appeal *in forma pauperis*.

X Nancy G. Edmunds
HON. NANCY G. EDMUNDS
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

Dated: 5-1-19